

So, what's new? (2)

Rev. Lisa Doege

Jan. 23, 2011

Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

Like Sally Jane in this morning's story, as a girl I inhabited a world that seemed very safe. It was an area of the suburb of Fridley bordered by 49th Avenue and 53rd Avenue to the south and north, University Avenue and Main Street to the east and west. The heart of that world, the place my family calls "the old neighborhood," is Clearview Street, a single, long suburban block, extending from Horizon Drive to Panorama, and no further.

My siblings and I grew up on Clearview Street, three houses from the corner of Horizon Drive. My sister was just starting kindergarten, my brother was only four months old, and I was not quite three years old when my parents bought our house there. Our family moved from Clearview Street more than thirty years ago, but for me, and I think for my siblings, the house we moved to and where Mom still lives, will always be the "new house."

Rarely, but always with great ceremony, we return to the old neighborhood sometimes. We drive along that long, curved block and around the corner, past the field the city flooded into a skating rink each winter and past the playground, onto Hughes, the street that runs behind the one we called home, then round the far corner and once more slowly down Clearview Street.

We see the first house any of us really remembers living in. We notice the new paint color and remember the line of rosebushes that used to frame the front of the house. We also see the place a neighbor fell and skinned his knees, chasing some boys who'd bullied his son, my brother's best friend. We see the place a kid from down the block, reading as he walked, stepped into a big hole full of water and disappeared, momentarily, completely submerged, until the city workers resting nearby pulled him out. We see the corner where we waited for the school bus. We see the faces that used to occupy those modest houses. Though it can't be seen from the street, we see it anyway, the backyard of our old house—almost twice the size of the front yard—with a clothesline behind the garage, and a line of poplar trees at the property line. The elm that stood at the edge of the front yard is long gone, of course.

I don't know why we keep going back. It's one street among thousands, in hundreds of first-ring suburbs throughout the land. No architectural treasures to marvel over, no landscaped gardens to admire; just tract houses built more than half a century ago for young families getting started. We don't go to visit friends; the families who peopled our years on Clearview Street have all moved on, just as we did. There is no cemetery in the

old neighborhood and none of our extended family ever lived there. We don't go to gravesides or family reunions. We go only because it was, it is home, in a way no place else will ever be. That stretch of pebbled asphalt where we learned to ride our bikes, the rink where we learned to ice skate. The yards we ran through barefoot and the playground too full of sand-burrs to risk bare feet. The homes of our first friends, the homes of older neighborhood kids, our babysitters, and the homes in which my sister and I eventually assumed the role of babysitter for younger neighborhood kids. It was a childhood like any other in 1970s Middle America, distinguished only in that it was ours, and in our hearts it lives on, in the old neighborhood. And we pay it a visit now and then to be reminded of who we are and where we got our start.

I bet most of you have a place in your past or present that dwells in your heart as the old neighborhood does in mine. It might not be a childhood home. Perhaps it's your grandparents' home or a school or the first apartment you lived in on your own. Maybe it's an entire city or a single room or a stretch of shoreline somewhere. Maybe you visit sometimes. Maybe you only go in your memories and dreams. But wherever it is and however you visit it, this much is certain: it's your home. It holds bits and pieces of your life, and but for it you wouldn't be the person you are today. And when you are lost or lonely or confused you return there to be reminded of who you are and where you got your start.

My sister and brother and I didn't know it then, of course, but compared to many in the world, we were extremely fortunate to have such a home of safety and prosperity; we are even more fortunate that it is still there, relatively unchanged. Ready for a visit whenever the feelings of nostalgia or the desire for grounding hit us. We never had to carry our home upon our backs. Never had to flee in terror. Never had to long for familiar surroundings from which we were forcibly evicted and not allowed to return. Home, a place of safety and belonging and loved, is both a basic need and a precious commodity in this uncertain world of ours.

In his study of globalization, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Thomas Friedman chose the olive tree to stand for all that means home, security, and identity to the human soul. It's a good metaphor. Through the ages trees have symbolized just those same things. Trees mean home. Some parents plant trees when children are born, one for each child. My mom's parents have trees planted on their graves. We tie yellow ribbon round trees as symbols of fidelity and welcome. We build playhouses in the branches of trees, special, secret places, homes within homes. Trees mean security. Countless stories, poems, songs laud their strength, their deep and spreading roots, their sheltering branches, the fruit and nuts they bear, their faithful renewal into green life each spring. When beloved trees finally fall or must be felled, we shape their wood into tables and benches, beds and

cabinets, in order to preserve the essence of their strength. Trees mean identity. Family trees tell us who we are, to whom we're related. They show patterns of names passed down through the generations. They identify both our clan and our place within it.

That Friedman should have focused on the olive tree, in particular, in his discussion of the age old, enduring human desire for home is particularly fitting. The olive, an ancient tree in an ancient land, speaks of permanence, of endurance, of stability in the face of all that the centuries have brought—wars and weather and progress. The allusion to the Middle East also reminds us that the need for a home that identifies us and grounds us in the history of our people is a fierce and undying one, such that disputes between two peoples who call the same land home are irresolvable, though not for lack of trying.

I cannot begin to speak with any insight or authority on the struggle between the Palestinians and the Israelis, or any of the other myriad pairs of peoples still fighting over a single home in the same land, all over the world today. But I know this about homes that aren't at the center of such bitter and passionate battles: good homes like good parents offer us a deep and abiding understanding of our individual identity and our family history, absolute security and freedom, safety and the ability to risk it all. Good homes, true homes, are the ones we can leave without losing ourselves. Good homes, true homes don't keep us bound in a net woven of fantasy and the mistaken idea that here is the only place we will ever be happy, safe, whole. Good, true homes teach us what home feels like, to recognize home when we see it. They empower us to go forth, when the circumstances of life demand it, to go forth and find or build new homes, just as good, as true, as safe and secure as the one we've left.

For many of you this church is where the world is comfortable, safe. Nora Church is home. Has always been home. Will always be home. This is where you see childhood friends in your mind's eye. This is the place you describe in detail when speaking of home--the gravestones on the hill, the sound of the bell on Sunday mornings, the smell of lefse grilling in the stua, generations of ministers standing in the pulpit, generations of aunts, uncles, grandparents and neighbors laughing over coffee and crying at memorial services.

There has been talk, from time to time, of leaving this home. Of moving Nora Church, relocating to a more populous area in an attempt to grow and ensure the future. More than simply talk, there was an experiment. Services held in New Ulm. And there are mixed feelings about the discontinuation of that experiment. I've heard it said that when you weren't here on the hill you weren't yourselves. And I've been told that some of you began reconsidering your long-term commitment to Nora because the experiment was given up too easily.

Change in the name of progress or in pursuit of progress or in response to changing circumstances is seldom smooth and easy and is never without loss. There are always objects, dreams, ways of being that we must let go. We live in a Lexus world, now even more than when Friedman wrote his book twelve years ago. In fact, Lexus sounds outdated. We live in a Prius world. A Chevy Volt World. A Nissan Leaf world. But we have olive tree hearts and olive tree souls.

The chapter I read from this morning opens with a photograph taken in Jerusalem showing an Hasidic man holding a cell phone up against the Wailing Wall so that a relative in France could say a prayer at the holy site. Friedman might have titled his book *The Wailing Wall and the Cell Phone*. Or perhaps, *The VW Beetle and the New Beetle*. The car I drive is a perfect example of middle-class America's desire to hold onto the olive tree without giving up progress. All of the nostalgia of the earlier model, few of the old problems.

When Johnny Cash died a few years back every obituary, every remembrance, every story I heard made the same point regarding the singer's long career. His music changed with the times. He never stopped playing decades old favorites, but he also never stopped applying his signature sound to new songs—including a cover of a Nine Inch Nails hit. That's an enviable balance.

Each of these, the Wailing Wall and the cell phone photograph, the New Beetle, Johnny Cash singing Nine Inch Nails, each of these is a reminder that we don't have to choose between progress and a sense of identity, and in fact, that life is lived most fully, most deeply with some mix of both.

In my mind a mix of progress and identity will characterize 2011 in the life of Nora Church. An invigorating, revitalizing mix of progress and identity. Before this new year is too many months old we will erect the tower and set the turbine ready to catch the wind and turn it into electricity. Progress (though, interestingly, progress with ancient roots). And before the New Year's end we will have celebrated Nora's one hundred and thirtieth anniversary with Gathering Day, a day of games and music and food from the 1880s. Identity.

Our opening words this morning were those of Sargent Shriver--equally known for being a Kennedy husband, brother-in-law, and father and for being the founding director of the Peace Corps. "It is well to be prepared for life as it is, but it is better to be prepared to make life better than it is." I don't know the context in which Shriver uttered those words, but he might well have been describing the mission of the church.

That mission is described in many ways: to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable; to save the world and to savor it (E.B. White); to bring about the kingdom of heaven on earth. Each gets at the issue from a slightly different angle but all have in common a dual focus on the present and the future. The world as it is and the world as it could be or should be or will one day be.

The worship life, programming, social justice work of many different faith communities reflect this dual focus. Hymns and prayers praise creation and yearn for a better world or time to come. Classes and lectures help us become better parents, care for elderly relatives, prepare for end of life decisions. Social justice projects seek to alleviate current suffering of the homeless or disaster stricken and to preserve a green and healthy earth for future generations. We challenge ourselves, seek to educate our young people, all to meet life as it is and to be prepared to make life better.

In remaining here on the hill *and* installing a wind tower you not only strive for a balance between identity and progress. You also claim your place in the present and stake your claim on the future. It may not be the future some of you envisioned--in New Ulm with full pews and busy, crowded Sunday School rooms. And it may not be quite the present some of you have been accustomed to--what with spending all that money; you are so much more comfortable with frugality. But it is a deliberately chosen present. You chose to stay here and you chose to invest in wind energy. And it is a faithful future, faithful to the vision of the founders who weren't afraid to take a new direction. And faithful to the dream of generations yet to come, generations in need of sustainable energy and in need of bold religious communities.

So, what's new? Nora's capturing the wind. Nora's going high-tech. Nora's betting on the future. But that's not so new after all. Nora folks first bet on the future in 1881. And you haven't stopped since.

This holy place, this safe and beloved home, isn't being flooded out, to disappear under the tide of progress. Soon Nora church will be living the Lexus life *and* the olive tree life. One hundred and thirty years on this hill. One hundred and thirty years of free spirited, forward thinking, independent faith. One hundred thirty years of ancestors, family members and neighbors. And 21st century technology. Prepared for life as it is. Prepared to make life better than it is. That's the heart of Nora Unitarian Universalist Church. Amen.